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ABSTRACT

A study compared the results of administration of the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages/Educational Testing Service (ACTFL/ETS) oral proficiency interview and those of two laboratory-administered Modern Language Association tests, one in the listening mode and one in the speaking mode. The comparative study was undertaken to determine whether a more rapidly administered procedure than the oral interview would give similar results. College students of French at varying levels took all three tests and were surveyed afterward for their reactions to them. Preliminary results indicate a moderate correlation between the two MLA tests and the oral interview, suggesting that in some circumstances, these tests might be used to replace the interview. It was also noted that while the MLA listening test is more efficient, some problems of interpretation must be addressed. Results of the student preference survey are still being analyzed. An alumni questionnaire of language background is appended. (MSE)

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STANDARDIZED TESTS AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE ORAL INTERVIEW

by

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Standardized Tests as an Alternative to the Oral Interview

by J. Sanford Dugan, Ph.D.

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Introduction

During the past seven or eight years, since the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages undertook to promote a procedure and a scale for measuring speaking proficiency, the "Proficiency Movement" has won general recognition among foreign language trachers. A major contribution of ACTFL's effort has been to establish the Oral Proficiency Interview as the best known measure of speaking proficiency in the profession. Considerable attention has been paid in the literature of the past few years to studying this measure. There are few language teaching journals that have not published one or more articles on proficiency. Numerous textbooks have included a proficiency orientation. Many regions of the country have benefited from workshops designed to familiarize teachers with the Oral Proficiency Interview. Many individuals have earned credentials from ACTFL as certified testers in both commonly and less commonly taught languages. The value of results from the Oral Proficiency Interview in terms of reliability seems fairly well established. In terms of validity there is controversy but not enough to prevent growing numbers of professionals from accepting it as a useful way to communicate about speaking proficiency.

The one undisputed characteristic of the oral interview is, however, that it takes time. Normally, in the ACTFL model, 15 to 30 minutes are required to carry out the interview. If a single rater conducts the interview alone, the interview should be recorded and rated by another qualified rater. Subsequent review by either or both raters, which may be necessary in borderline cases, adds even more time. Assuming an average time of 60 minutes per student, it can be seen that teachers dealing with upwards of 90 students a semester will not find this a practical procedure in situations where large numbers of students need to be tested in a short period, such as for placement at the start of a program or for final evaluation at the end of a program. However, if another procedure were shown to give similar results with more rapidly administered procedures, the latter might have some use. It is the purpose of this paper to present evidence of a correlation between the results of the oral proficiency interview with two laboratory administered tests, one in the listening mode and one in the speaking mode.

Procedures

In the winter term of 1984, with considerable cooperation and collaboration within the Department of Foreign Languages and Bilingual Studies at a medium-sized regional public university in the midwest, a group of sudents at various levels in French took the oral proficiency interview and two laboratory tests, the MLA listening test and the MLA speaking test. It was made clear to the students that participation in the tests was a required part of the course but that the results of the tests would not count toward a grade. Following each test, students completed a survey composed of twelve questions asking their reactions to the test. The results of the tests and surveys are in the process of being analyzed and prepared in order to be submitted for publication.

A. The Sample

In the winter term 1984, the Department offered 15 French classes at four undergraduate levels and one graduate level. There were a total of 231 enrollments representing approximately 197 people. Since one person may register for more than one French course, there are more enrollments than people. There were 79 students at the 100 level; none of these were registered for classes at a higher level. There were 58 200-level students, one of whom was also registered in a course at a higher level. At the 300 level there was a total of 47 people, 7 of whom were enrolled in more than one course. At the 400, 500, and 600 levels, where two courses at different levels are often combined into one class, about 15 people were enrolled in four classes. The percentage of participation at the different levels and overall is as follows: 100 level: 73%; 200 level: 60%; 300 level: 67%; 400 level: 15% (approximately); 500, 600 (graduate) levels: 0%. The overall participation was 64%.

B. The Instruments

The Oral Proficiency Interview is a procedure and a rating scale that the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, in collaboration with the Educational Testing Service, has adapted from a model used for many years by U.S. government foreign language training agencies. ACTFL began offering workshops to train foreign language teachers in the academic sector to use a modified scale and procedure that are consistent with the levels reached by students of foreign languages in schools and colleges. Briefly, the interview takes place between a candidate and the tester. There is no fixed set of questions. Based on candidate responses to a few warm-up questions, the tester attempts to launch a conversation in which the candidate can show the highest level of

proficiency of which he or she is capable. The scale used has nine levels divided into four ranges; the ranges are called Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. Once the tester is confident of having given ample opportunity for the candidate to speak and is confident of the rating to be given, the interview is brought to a close. Depending on the candidate's proficiency, the interview may last from 15 minutes to as much as one half hour. Usually the interview is recorded, and, in order to gain an official rating from ACTFL, the interview is rated by another certified tester. In the present case, I carried out the interviews in the winter term of 1984, having participated in the ACTFL tester training workshop in the fall of 1983. I recorded the interviews for my own interest, but they were not reviewed by any others, and the ratings assigned are mine alone.

The MLA tests of listening and speaking are a set of different tests at three different levels, L, M, and H, developed by the Modern Language Association in collaboration with the Educational Testing Service in the early 1960's. The listening test is on audio tape, lasts about 30 minutes, and can be administered to a large group in one sitting. The speaking test lasts about 15 minutes and requires that the candidate's responses be recorded on tape. It can be administered to a group in a language laboratory. These tests can be characterized as discrete-point item tests, that is, each question focuses on a very limited linguistic problem. The level L test was written for students near the end of one year of college French, level M for students near the end of two years, and level H for students near the end of a college major program preparing a career in teaching. In an ambitious norming study conducted by ETS in the 1960's, all levels of the tests were admnistered to students in selected schools around the country. The results were intercorrelated to create an overall converted score scale ranging from 100(?) to 300 (?). In the present study, students took both the listening test and the speaking test in the language laboratory. Students registered in French 121 and 122 took the listening and speaking tests at level L; students in French 222, 233, and 234 took level M; and students in French 342, 344, and 362 and above took level H. For the listening test, all items were multiple-choice. The papers were scored and the scores were converted to the converted score scale. The speaking test responses were recorded on audio cassette, and each one was evaluated by myself following guidelines recommended in the MLA manual. The resulting scores were also converted to the converted score scale.

Students were given a survey consisting of a rating scale from one to five, with one representing strongly agree and 5 representing strongly disagree, and twelve statements. Students were instructed to rate their

reactions to all statements immediately following each of the tests. They were also asked to sign their copy of the survey.

C. Analysis

Following the administration of the tests and gathering of results considerable time has been devoted to rating the speaking tests and to transfering data to a form that can be analyzed by computer. That work is still going on. Some preliminary results are available.

Results

A. Descriptive statistics

Results of Tests by Semester Level

Mean/Standard Deviation

(N=Number of Subjects)

Course Number	Semester Level	OPI	MLA LSI	MLA SPK
FRN 121	1	2.3/1.0 (N=32)	151.8/10.1 (N=36)	169.4/12.1 (N=33)
FRN 122	2	2.9/1.3 (N=15)	162.6/9 (N=8)	176.4/7.2 (N=11)
FRN 222, 234	4	4.2/1.3 (N=52)	167.0/11.9 (N=54)	172.9/6.0 (N=52)
FRN 362	6	5.7/1.2 (N=19)	175.8/14.9 (N=23)	186.2/5.2 (N=23)
FRN	6-9	5.7/1.3 (N=10)	184.9/17.6 (N=15)	188.1/8.0 (N=16)

As can be seen, there is a clear progression in the test results according to the semester level of enrollment. This is true for all of the tests. Just how close this correlation is can be seen in a correlation coefficient, as follows:

B. Correlations

Correlation tables for the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), the MLA Speaking Test (SPK), and the MLA Listening Test (LIS); N is the number of cases available and p is the significance level

FRN 121 (Pearson r)

	OPI	SPK	LIS	
OPI				
SPK	0.72 (N=28)			
LIS	0.73 (N=31)	0.80 (N=33)		p<0.001

FRN 122 (Pearson r)

	OPI	SPK	LIS	
OPI				
SPK	0.49 (N=25)			
LIS	0.64 (N=27)	0.65 (N=30)		p<0.01

FRN 222 (Pearson r)

	OPI	SPK	LIS	
OPI				
SPK	0.64 (19)			
LIS	0.53 (20)	0.47 (20)		p<0.1

OPI-MLA 6

FRN 234 (Pearson r)

	OPI	SPK	LIS	
OPI				
SPK	0.60 (31)			
LIS	0.69 (32)	0.74 (32)		p<0.001

FRN 342, 344, 362 (443/620) (Pearson r)

	OPI	SPK	LIS	
OPI				
SPK	0.75 (N=28)			
LIS	0.68 (N=28)	0.74 (N=36)		p<0.001

All Levels (Spearman rho)

	OPI	SPK	LIS	
OPI				
SPK	0.61 (N=133)			
LIS	0.74 (N=139)	0.71 (N=153)		p<0.01

The N value, that is, the number of people whose scores are used in the correlation, is different within a given class, because, when one person did not take both tests being correlated, that person's score is not included. In each table there are also correlation values and a confidence level. In most tables the highest correlation is between the MLA Listening

and the MLA Speaking tests. This is expected, since the two tests were developed together by the Educational Testing Service. In four of six tables the lowest correlation is between the MLA Speaking Test and the Oral Proficiency Interview. This is surprising, but may be explained by the fact that scoring the MLA Speaking Test is complicated, and maintaining reliability is very difficult. The most interesting correlation is between the Oral Proficiency Interview and the MLA Listening Test. In only one class did the value fall below 0.60. That class, FRN 222, is devoted mostly to reading French; there is little emphasis on listening/speaking abilities, which are more important in all the other classes. In the correlation of scores at all levels the MLA Listening with Oral Proficiency Interview value shows a moderately strong correlation. The confidence values are satisfactory, except in the case of FRN 222, where p=0.1. This means that the result may not be significant statistically and may not merit being considered.

In a related study, thirteen students from a 300-level class were candidates for the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Paris Certificat de français des affaires. To obtain the Certificat, students must successfully pass an examination that takes a full day and includes four written parts and two oral parts. As this exam was administered at E.M.U., the results of the oral part of the test were available. When these results are correlated with the results of the Oral Proficiency Interview, a Pearson r of 0.67 with a p value of <.01 is observed.

Discussion

There seems to be more than a hint that the MLA listening test and the MLA speaking test have a moderate correlation with the ACTFL/ETS Oral Proficiency Interview. This suggests that, in some circumstances, one of these tests might be used to replace the other. For example, when there is a need to screen large numbers of candidates in a short period of time, as at the begnning of a program of instruction, the listening test, which can be administered to considerable numbers in one sitting and scored rapidly, even by machine, might serve as a basis for preliminary judgment of individuals' proficiency in speaking. Another possible use of the apparently more efficient procedure would be to help candidates who are preparing for an oral interview that may be a requirement for successful completion of a program of instruction.

While the MLA Listening Test is more efficient, there is a problem that

must be addressed if it is used for placing students in a program. This test is really three tests at different levels. Although the scores are convertible to a converted score scale, some idea of the student's prior background in the language is needed in order to chose the test whose score will show most effectively the student's true level. Such information is not always available or interpretable, as in the case of someone who has not followed a regular program of study. This is less of a problem when the MLA Listening test is used within a given program where the student's progress is already known.

Some ways that this study might be improved if it were to be run again would be to have more than one rater for the oral proficiency interview and to have independent raters, that is, one who are not directly involved in teaching the students to be tested. Another improvement would be to base the identifying of the sample group on a random selection procedure.

It will be interesting to see whether the results of the student attitude survey will show a preference for any one of the tests or whether students seem to view them as equally valid for testing their proficiency in the language.

Conclusion

The presenting of information on a moderate correlation between the time-consuming face-to-face Oral Proficiency Interview and the more efficiently administered and scored MLA Listening test is perhaps not surprising, given the observation that language learning has at least a general factor. That is to say, the learning of different skills, such as speaking and listening, involves, to some extent, learning a combined or "general" skill in the language. Given a normal sample of language students over a wide range of levels, those individuals who are more proficient in listening will most probably be more proficient in speaking. Furthermore, greater efficiency with similar results does not make one test better for use in all situations. The oral interview has a flexibility allowing personal interchange between tester and candidate that is impossible in the language lab. This opportunity for communication, when time constraints are not as much of a factor, is a distinct advantage

ALUMNI QUESTIONNAIRE

For items which do not specify other directions, please circle the letter(s) of the most appropriate responses(s).

PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL DATA

1. What is your citizenship?

   a. U.S.
   b. Other_____

2. What degree/certification did you complete at EMU?

   a. Bachelor's degree
   b. Master's degree
   c. Elementary certification
   d. Secondary certification
   e. K-12 certification

3. What was your major area of study? (If Language and International Trade, circle language area as well.)

   a. English as a Second Language
   b. French
   c. German
   d. Spanish
   e. Bilingual Education
   f. Language and International Trade
   g. TESOL

4. When did you complete your program?

   Month_____19____

5. Have you taken any certification or competency examinations related to your program of study?

   a. No
   b. Yes, and I passed.
   c. Yes, and I did not pass.
   d. Yes, but I do not yet know the result.

6. If you answered "Yes" to #5, which examination did you take?

   _____

7. Since completing your program at EMU, have you continued, or do you plan to continue, your education?

   a. Yes, I have completed further study.
   b. Yes, I am currently enrolled in a program.
   c. Yes, I plan to continue my education.
   d. No, I have no such plans.

8. If you answered "Yes" to #7, what further degree or certificate have you earned or do you plan to earn?

   _____

9. If you answered #8,

   A. What was/is your main area of study?

   _____

   B. What was/is your reason for furthering your studies?

   _____

   _____

   _____

10. Did you complete an internship, cooperative education, or student teaching assignment at EMU?

    a. Yes, in the U.S.
    b. Yes, overseas in _____
    c. No.

11. If you answered "Yes" to #13:

    A. Name of company or school:

    _____

    B. From _____ (Month/Yr) to _____ (Month/Yr)

12. How would you rate EMU assistance in locating your off-campus assignment?

    a. Excellent
    b. Good
    c. Fair
    d. Poor

13. How would you rate your off-campus assignment?

    a. Excellent
    b. Good
    c. Fair
    d. Poor
    e. Waste of Time

14. Objectives. Please indicate whether your program at EMU helped you meet the following objectives by checking the most appropriate response.

Academic Objectives	Yes	No	N/A
a. Increase knowledge and understanding of your field of study	___	___	___
b. Obtain a degree or certificate	___	___	___
c. Apply theoretical learning	___	___	___
d. Identify important professional organizations and sources of information	___	___	___

Career Education and Preparation	Yes	No	N/A
e. Discover career interests	___	___	___
f. Develop long-term career goals	___	___	___
g. Prepare for a career change	___	___	___
h. Obtain skills for your career	___	___	___
i. Increase chances for promotion	___	___	___

15. Which of the above objectives (or others you have/had) were the most important during your studies and which do you think are the most important now?

	During studies	Now
Most important	_____	_____
Second	_____	_____
Third	_____	_____

EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION

16. Are you currently employed?

a. Yes, full-time
b. Yes, part-time
c. No

If yes, how long have you been in this position? _____

17. In what area was the first job you had after completion of your EMU program?

a. Government
b. Business/Industry
c. Public school
d. Private school
e. Junior college
f. University
g. Vocational school
h. Adult education

18. Describe your position (accountant, elementary teacher), listing the three most important duties:

_____

19. If not the same, what is your current job, or if unemployed, your most recent job?

a. Area of employment (refer to #17)

_____

b. Description of position (i.e. duties)

_____

_____

_____

20. What is your current annual salary? (For part-time jobs, estimate full-time equivalent.)

a. Less than $20,000
b. $20,000--$29,000
c. $30,000--$39,000
d. $40,000 or more

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21. Was knowing a foreign language a significant factor in your finding employment?

    a. Yes b. No

22. To what extent is your current (or most recent) job related to your major area of study?

    a. Directly related
    b. Somewhat related
    c. Not related at all

23. If you answered "Not at all" to #22, why not?

    a. I never looked for work related to my area of study.

    b. I looked for a job in my area, but could not find one.

24. To what extent do the functions of your present (or most recent) job involve using your foreign language?

    a. More than 4 hours a day
    b. 1 to 4 hours a day
    c. Once a week
    d. Once a month
    e. None

25. If you answered positively to #24, which language?

    _____

26. If you use a language in your job, for what purpose(s)?

    a. Reading
    b. Writing
    c. Speaking
    d. Listening
    e. Translating
    f. Interpreting

27. How did you find your current (most recent) job?

    a. EMU Placement Office
    b. EMU professor contact
    c. Professional organization
    d. Employment agency
    e. Classified ad
    f. Direct application
    g. Friends/relatives
    h. Through co-op/internship
    i. Other

    _____

SUMMARY QUESTIONS

28. How would you rate your overall language and culture preparation at EMU for your current (most recent) job?

    a. Excellent b. Good c. Adequate d. Inadequate

29. What were the strengths of the EMU program in preparing you for your current work and/or studies?

30. What were the weaknesses of the EMU program in preparing you for your current work and/or studies? Are there essential courses or areas of studies that need to be developed or added to the language/trade program? If so, what are they?

All personal information supplied in answer to the above questions will remain strictly confidential. Alumni of the Language and International Trade program please go on to page 4 for more specific questions regarding your area.

LANGUAGE AND INTERNATIONAL TRADE QUESTIONNAIRE

The following ten items are specifically to be answered by those whose degrees are in Language and International Trade.

1. To what extent is your employer involved in international concerns?

   a. 76 - 100%
   b. 51 - 75%
   c. 26 - 50%
   d. 1 - 25%
   e. Not at all

   If you answered one from a-d, with which countries?

   _____

2. What is the primary activity of your firm?

   a. Manufacturing (non-auto)
   b. Auto manufacturing
   c. Retail/ Wholesale
   d. Finance/ Banking
   e. Transportation
   f. Other _____

3. What are your firm's annual sales? (in millions of dollars)

   a. Under 10
   b. 10 - 25
   c. 25 - 50
   d. 50 - 100
   e. 100 - 250
   f. 250 - 500
   g. 500 - 1 billion
   h. Over 1 billion
   i. I don't know

4. How many employees does your firm have in the U.S.?

   a. Under 100
   b. 100 - 499
   c. 500 - 999
   d. 1000 and over
   e. I don't know.

5. Does your firm have overseas subsidiaries?

   Yes_____ No_____

6. How many employees does your firm have outside the U.S.?

   a. Under 100
   b. 100 - 499
   c. 500 - 999
   d. 1000 and over
   e. I don't know.

7. What is the primary activity of your firm in international business?

   a. Export
   b. Import
   c. Import-Export
   d. Finance
   e. Freight Forwarding
   d. Other _____

8. To what extent are the duties of your job related to int'l concerns?

   a. 76 - 100%
   b. 51 - 75%
   c. 26 - 50%
   d. 1 - 25%
   e. Not at all

9. In which business area did you concentrate?

   a. Accounting
   b. Finance
   c. Management
   d. Marketing
   e. Other _____

10. To what extent were your business studies a factor in your finding a job?

    a. Very Important
    b. Important
    c. Slightly Important
    d. Unimportant